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Indian legends Very good

THE GREATEST GIFT

Again I sat beside old Ma-ith-a, daughter of the Tyee Simyeal, in the golden glow of a late September afternoon. She had been weaving a mat of dried bulrush stalks, without which no Indian habitation is complete. But now the shadows were lengthening and she sat idly, contentedly enjoying the small gift of tobacco I had brought her.

I noticed that the framework of her crude loom was lashed together with strips of soaked and beaten cedar branches, the basket beside her that held her weaving 'comb' and mallet was woven of cedar roots and the stools we sat upon were seated with strips of the inner bark of the cedar tree.

"Your people used cedar in a great many ways", I remarked.

Her wise old eyes twinkled as she looked at me. She knew I was 'fishing' for a story. But she continued to puff at her pipe for a while without speaking. Then she said,

"It was indeed the greatest gift."

" Many, many years ago, beyond the memory of man, three great chiefs met in Council Lodge to pray to the Great Spirit. In those days our people were often cold and hungry, and there was little shelter from the cold winds that blew down from the great white North country. For the hills were covered only with scrub oak and juniper and jack pine and our villages could be built only in sheltered valleys. It was hard

to keep the tribal fire going,--the fire that had to be brought from the far valley in the North, where the flame burst through a fissure in the earth and the hot water spurted up in many fountains.

The young chief of the Haidas, a fierce and warlike tribe, made his prayer first:

"Give me, O Great Spirit, dominion over my enemies to the north and to the south; give me many women and child slaves of the conquered tribes, that I may be known throughout the land as the greatest chief of the Haida nation."

And the chief of the Kwawkuiulth (kwa-kwe-ulth) tribe, who lived beside the inland sea, spoke next:

"Oh Great Spirit, make the salmon and the oolachan and the herring to come into our streams as the sands of the sea; make the wild goats to increase upon our hills and the wild dog to bear heavy litters; so my women may weave many swoqulths (blankets) and I be known as the richest chief among the nations."

Then the old chief of the Siwash nation, a wise and kindly man, made his prayer:

"Give me, O Great Spirit, in your wisdom, that which will be best for my people."

And the Great Spirit spoke to Noo-ah-noo in the smoke of the council fire:

"Because you have not asked for glory or for riches but for the good of your people, I will give you my greatest gift. Go to where the warm waters of the great Sea swing toward the shore. Take that which the tide will bring you, Cherish it, give it shelter in winter and drink in summer. It will be as food and clothing and shelter for your people."

So Noo-ah-noo did. He journeyed south for many days till he reached the place where the warm tides of the great ocean swept towards the narrow passage that leads to the inland sea. And there, borne on the crest of a wave upon the shore was a huge old tree trunk with gnarled and twisted roots flung to the sky. And in the hollow at the base was a small handfull of earth and a tiny plant no higher than his hand

therein. Noo-ah-noo carefully lifted it and carried it back to his own land and planted it and tended it for many years. And in time it grew into a stately tree and all the valley was peopled with its brothers. Our people slept dry beneath its drooping branches and of its bark was woven cloth for clothing and for ~~knaks~~ tents. Of the roots of its young saplings and its branches were woven our baskets, our dishes and our cooking pots. From its giant trunks were burned and shaped our great war canoes, and the lesser canoes that helped us catch the fish we needed for our food. Of its fibers, too, we wove our fishing nets and traps. Of its soft inner bark, tanned in the bark of the scrub oak and dyed in the juice of elder berries and sumach leaves were made our dancing masks and the girdles and headbands of our warriors. The dried and powdered wood made tinder for our fire sticks, so we no longer feared to let our fires out. All these things and many more, our people made of cedar. It was indeed the greatest gift.